INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION

1990–1999

UNITED NATIONS

BACKGROUND

Each year planet Earth experiences countless dynamic natural phenomena: 100,000 thunderstorms; 10,000 floods; thousands of earthquakes, wildfires, landslides, avalanches and tornadoes; and hundreds of volcanic eruptions, tropical cyclones and locust infestations, all of which can cause death, injury and damage to property. Over the last two decades, they have claimed perhaps 3 million lives and caused upheaval and dislocation for at least 1 billion people. Since 1949, at least 17 catastrophes have taken a toll of more than 10,000 lives each. In two instances—Bangladesh and China—more than 250,000 perished in single catastrophes.

On 29 June 1990, an earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale hit Gilan Province, south-west of the Caspian Sea. An aftershock that registered 6.5 on the scale struck an area 200 kilometres north-west of Teheran.

Dead: 40,000
Injured: 105,000
Affected: 250,000

Natural disasters will strike as long as natural hazards exist. But natural hazards do not automatically cause disasters. Today, there is more scientific knowledge than ever before to anticipate the potential effects of a disaster before it strikes. The reality is that disasters are increasing in number and their impact is more destructive, with growing population density, urbanization and weak physical infrastructure in areas that are hazard-prone. A concerted effort to reduce the vulnerability of populations might confine the loss of life and property to a minimum.

Believing that fatalism about natural disasters is no longer justified, and recognizing the need for the international community to demonstrate strong political determination to mobilize existing scientific and technical knowledge for natural disaster mitigation, the United Nations General Assembly declared the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR).

The Decade mainly addresses the natural hazards that create sudden disasters as well as the impact of disasters caused by drought and locust infestations. A disaster is not the inevitable result of a natural hazard of great magnitude, and, conversely, a disaster can result from a natural hazard of relatively small magnitude. In recent times, developing countries have borne the most damaging losses, in terms of lives lost and set-backs to their economies. Even in industrialized countries that have the resources to give advance warning, plan and mobilize, room exists for further disaster mitigation efforts.

In the words of the Secretary-General of the United Nations:

"The Decade offers an opportunity for the United Nations to demonstrate its catalytic ability to bring together the diversity of skills, resources and groups needed to stem the losses from natural disasters . . . It has the moral authority to call for disaster reduction efforts by all nations, including the developing ones where the toll from such disasters is most tragic in terms of human losses and economic set-backs. Further, the United Nations system has in place many programmes that promote various aspects of disaster reduction and, through greater co-ordination and enhanced visibility, can accomplish more in the years ahead."

RECENT MAJOR DISASTERS

YEAR	MONTH	DISASTER	COUNTRY/ AREA	PERSONS AFFECTED*
1990	JUL	EARTHQUAKE	PHILIPPINES	1.5
	JUN	EARTHQUAKE	IRAN	0.25
1989	SEP	HURRICANE HUGO	CARIBBEAN	**
	JUL	FLOODS/LANDSLIDES	CHINA	100.0
	JUL	FLOODS	BRAZIL	0.5
1988	DEC	EARTHQUAKE	ARMENIA, USSR	0.5
	OCT	TYPHOON RUBY	PHILIPPINES	1.0
	SEP	FLOODS	BANGLADESH	75.0
	SEP	HURRICANE GILBERT	HAITI/JAMAICA	1.5
	AUG	FLOODS	SUDAN	1.0

* ESTIMATE (MILLIONS)
** NOT AVAILABLE

NATURAL DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Preparedness means operation of a detection and warning infrastructure; dissemination of warnings and instructions; communication of information to and from communities before, during and after the disaster.

Prevention includes such mechanisms as development of scenarios of potential disasters; hazard mapping combined with assessing populations at risk; formulation of government policies and regulations; installation of detection and warning systems; land-use restrictions, environmental management such as reforestation and revegetation and application of structural engineering measures.

Are you prepared?

How about:
- awareness of natural hazards around you?
- emergency food supplies, medicines and water?
- means of communications, e.g. radio?
- house or building maintenance?
- evacuation practices?

Is the community prepared?

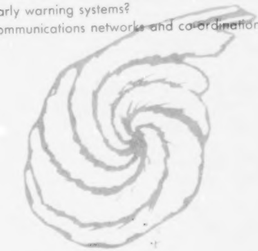
How about:
- emergency shelters?
- emergency supplies?
- means of alerting the community?
- evacuation plans?
- training personnel to respond promptly?

Is the Government prepared?

How about:
- disaster prevention and mitigation programmes?
- a national committee to assist preparedness-related programmes and activities?
- national co-ordination mechanisms?
- public education campaigns?
- relief and recovery activities?

Are the business sector, scientific community and media involved?

How about:
- financial and technical support for disaster management?
- investment in infrastructure?
- scientific and technological contributions?
- early warning systems?
- communications networks and co-ordination?



Unusually heavy rainfall between 20 and 28 August 1988 led to peak flood levels of the Brahmaputra, Ganges and Meghna rivers in early September. By mid-September, 53 out of 64 districts in Bangladesh were flooded, causing enormous damage to crops, transport and communications.

Dead: 1,500
Affected: 75 million

Is the world prepared?

How about:
- devising strategies for international action and regional co-operation?
- co-ordination of relief activities?
- financial and technical assistance to developing countries?
- information sharing?
- a world-wide public education campaign?

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INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF ACTION

In adopting the International Framework of Action for the Decade at its 44th session in 1989, the General Assembly set out the following goals:

To improve the capacity of each country to mitigate the effects of natural disasters rapidly and effectively, paying special attention to helping developing countries assess disaster damage potential and creating early warning systems and disaster-resistant structures;

To devise appropriate guidelines for applying existing scientific and technical knowledge, taking into account the cultural and economic diversity among nations;

Mudflows destroyed and buried forests, houses, roads and bridges for more than 20 km down the main valleys from Mount St. Helens when it erupted in 1980.

To foster scientific and engineering research to close critical gaps in knowledge that could help reduce loss of life and property;

To disseminate existing and new technical information on disaster prediction and mitigation; and

To develop measures to assess, predict, prevent and mitigate natural disasters through technical assistance, technology transfer, education and training.

The Assembly then called upon:

Governments to formulate national disaster-mitigation programmes and to adopt specific economic, land use and insurance policies for disaster prevention;

Scientific and technological institutions, businesses, foundations and non-governmental organizations to participate in the activities of the Decade; and

The United Nations system to make concerted efforts to facilitate natural disaster preparedness, prevention, relief and recovery activities.

WHO IS IN CHARGE OF THE PREPARATIONS?

A secretariat for IDNDR has been set up in Geneva. This secretariat will work closely with the Office of the UN Disaster Relief Co-ordinator. It has the task of co-ordinating activities among Governments, national committees for the Decade and the scientific community. It will establish the orientation of the Decade's activities, create public awareness programmes and initiate action likely to promote the objectives of the Decade.

A scientific and technical committee, composed of up to 25 high-level specialists, mostly drawn from outside the UN system, will provide guidance on substantive issues. It will identify gaps in national, regional and international activities to reduce disasters and propose new techniques.

A special high-level council, composed of world-renowned personalities, will assist the United Nations Secretary-General to create awareness at the senior-most level of national Governments and to obtain financial assistance.

PARTNERS IN THE FIELD

The Office of the UN Disaster Relief Co-ordinator (UNDRO) is the focal point of the UN system in disaster relief activities. When disaster strikes, UNDRO helps assess the damage and evaluate emergency needs, mobilizes aid from the international community and co-ordinates the distribution of donations and relief activities. It also arranges technical assistance for disaster preparedness and prevention, and promotes the study, prevention, control and prediction of natural disasters.

The UN Development Programme provides funds and expertise for development projects which help reduce the damage caused by the effects of natural disasters. The World Health Organization plays a pivotal role in stemming epidemics, while the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN fights locust infestations. The World Meteorological Organization provides meteorological and hydrological information and services. The UN Environment Programme co-ordinates activities for the protection of the environment, whereas the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is engaged in research in hydrology and geology.

These are a few examples of organizations in the UN system that will provide their expertise in social, health and economic sectors as primary agents for the exchange of information and technical knowledge to upgrade the level of disaster preparedness. More than 30 countries have set up national committees for the Decade.

Active participation of Governments, non-governmental organizations, media, academic institutions, communities and the public in natural disaster prevention and preparedness activities is essential for saving lives and making the Decade a success.

Hurricane Hugo wreaked enormous damage when it struck the eastern Caribbean islands in September 1989.

For further information on IDNDR:

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INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION
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